DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 106 983 EA 007 179

AUTHOR Sinclair, Robert L.
TITLE Critical Awareness for Improvement: The School and You.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (60th, Washington, D.C., March 31-April 4, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; Decision Making; *Educational Change; *Educational Environment; *Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; *Principals

ABSTRACT

Not all schools have conditions that resist improvement, nor are all schools led by principals who are part of the problem. Yet, experience teaches us that, no matter what changes are attempted, many schools do not get better. More schools can be improved by leaders who are critically aware of what is blocking advancement of school practices. A means orientation, a teacher and administrator emphasis, and a top-down decision-making process are some conditions that are likely to impinge on school improvement. Principals can use these three conditions to analyze their own school environment. If their school is characterized by some or all of the conditions, they might decide to take purposeful action to eliminate traits that resist change. The first step toward reconstructing the school environment is arriving at an awareness of the reality that hinders improvement. This critical awareness may result in commitment to action that will make obsolete the persistent notion that schools do not improve. (Author)

ED106983

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

CRITICAL AWARENESS FOR IMPROVEMENT: THE SCHOOL AND YOU

by

Robert L. Sinclair
Director, Center for
Curriculum and Organization
School of Education
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts

This paper centers on the school principal as key leader for moving research knowledge into action for school improvement. The paper works from the practical as a way to identify conditions in educational environments that hinder school improvement. By directing the writing toward principals and their critical awareness, it is hoped that readers will sense the immediacy and the importance in educators perceiving themselves capable and responsible for creating school environments.

EA 007 129

April, 1975

CRITICAL AWARENESS FOR IMPROVEMENT: THE SCHOOL AND YOU[1]

Like an odd-shaped piece of a jig-saw puzzle that loses its edge after being mispositioned, a desired change can be so blunted by the ongoingness of the school that its influence is seldom felt by learners. Too often the school in which we work, similar to a personality that lacks capacity for renewal, is dominated by traits that resist improvement. Principals have the right and obligation to transform the conditions of such schools. They cannot wait with folded arms for others to serve-up directions. They must develop critical awareness of what stymies improvement and then initiate plans for action. Future directions will come from within the school, defined and acted on by the principal. In plain words, one path to school improvement is positive action by the principal to eliminate the character of the environment that hinders the process of schools and people becoming better.

This paper sets into motion the development of critical awareness in principals as a first step for initiating better schools. There are, of course, some principals who will not consider altering or adjusting the way they lead or what they lead. Possibly these hesitant colleagues are dependent on the very structure that resists improvement. They have become principals because of their ability to adapt to school environment, not because of their talent to transform conditions of schools. Many principals cannot look critically at the structure responsible for shaping them, the same structure that permits them to wait. The view of future schools as being a carbon of the present, or of the future as being predetermined, is in need of liberation. To this end, three major conditions of school reality likely to stop improvement are advanced for consideration.[2]

• SCHOOLS VIEW IMPROVEMENT AS RESTRUCTURING ORGANIZATIONAL MEANS, NOT AS REDEFINING OBJECTIVES OF SCHOOLING. Emerging school problems are translated into procedures, ideas into processes; and both are submerged into what already exists. Challenging ideas for improvement are confronted by asking if what is being proposed can be implemented within the already established way the school functions. Unfortunately, principals are often considered "good" if they can refer all questions and ideas to an organizational plan. Directions for the school are determined by what can be controlled within the present organization. What principals in this environment fail to see is that school organization is a means not an end.

Decision making for school organization requires more rational procedures if it is to lead to improved schooling. Principal and staff should not be restricted to the method of organization existing in their school. Many emerging problems a school faces, whether lack of community participation in determining curriculum priorities or underachievement in reading, demand setting of new ends, rather than merely convenient adjusting of the present way the staff and students are organized. After careful consideration is given to determining what the school is to accomplish with learners, it is then possible to better decide on an effective pattern of organization.[3]

The continual attempt to face problems of schooling by looking prematurely to organizational solutions suggests, in part, that principals do not consider the need for schools to attain new objectives. Equally concerning is the related suggestion that there is no attempt to respond to problems by the elimination of existing objectives. The setting of objectives for a school does not mean that there is no cause to respond to problems by redefining or eliminating initial objectives. Too often

the energy of a school is spent only on strategies to accomplish previously designated objectives thus leading to problem solving that is hampered by the blinders of the current organization. If problems in a school program emerge, strategies are quickly designed with little attention directed to the possibility that the objectives of the program are inappropriate. Objectives are not permanent, they require continuous revision and elimination.[4] Brackenbury supports this temporary nature of objectives by stating, "Human beings generally like to do a task and be done with it. Unfortunately, objectives are much like dishes. If they are used, they require repeated doing and redoing. Since objectives grow out of experience as well as guide experience, they are never set once and for all."[5]

Fundamentally, although the ends of schooling are under close scrutiny today, many schools respond only by tinkering with means. Such a narrow inturning leads to approaches to desired improvement that somehow fit every odd piece into the parameters of the presently existing organizational puzzle. How seldom we step back to puzzle over the whole.

- SCHOOLS ARE OVERLY CONCERNED WITH CENTERING DECISIONS ON TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS. THEY LOOK AT THEIR ENTERPRISE AS TEACHING RATHER THAN LEARNING. Educational environments where teaching and administration, not learning, come first, are fostered by many factors outside the classroom doors. For example, potential leadership can be squandered in political struggles between principals and teachers that revolve around teacher security and pay issues. The critical issue of improving the quality of learning done by children gets bypassed by principals who argue that teaching pay increases create limitations on resources available for students, and by teachers who fight their powerlessness by seeking tenure and fringe

benefits without giving accordant attention to the need for changes in learning conditions.

A classroom organized with the prerogatives of teaching reflects an administration that places management ahead of learning. The leadership behavior of the principal influences the nature of the climate for learning in classrooms. In schools led by authoritarian principals, students tend to perceive their classroom environments as being authoritarian. In the same way, principals who include teachers in decision-making foster schools where students perceive their classrooms as encouraging choice and involvement. A peculiar feature of hierarchies holds: as the principal goes so goes the school.[7]

Behind the classroom doors where teaching is the priority, collaborative interactions between teachers and students are limited while the exploratory behavior of students is controlled. Physically, chairs in rows face the teacher's desk and blackboard, while information and resources are locked away and doled out by the teacher. Pre-packaged curriculum textbooks or teaching packets developed by outside corporations make a teacher's life easier by reducing the need for teacher creativity and by lending the authority of the printed page to consumption of subject matter. Fascination with teacher-proof classroom management systems (ways for teachers to set up, and students to accept, a routine of learning activities) tend to limit real collaboration and restrict the range of learning activities possible for students.

Educational environments organized around the prerogatives of teaching converge to a state of day-to-day equalibrium. Principals and teachers in such settings strive to find a routine that gets them through without hassles - then recoil in surprise when their schools are scored for inertia, blandness, routine. Still, when we ask in a school "will it work?" we

ask this persistent question on the immediate, daily, routine level of teacher and administrative organization, and lose sight of our real long-range hopes and concerns, together with those of our students and their parents.

While attempting to develop a school environment that centers more on learning, we might reconsider this brief statement from the Plowden Report:

> "...A school is not merely a teaching shop, it must transmit values and attitudes. It is a community in which children learn to live first and foremost as children and not as future adults....Children need to be themselves, to live with other children and with grown ups, to learn from their environment, to enjoy the present, to get ready for the future, to create and to love, to learn to face adversity, to behave responsibly, in a word, to be human beings."[8]

- PEOPLE CLOSEST TO THE LEARNER HAVE LIMITED DECISION-MAKING POWER. IN EFFECT, TEACHERS USUALLY ACCEPT OR REJECT WHAT OTHERS HAVE DECIDED.

Schools can concentrate more on learning if teachers make decisions about the nature of learning environments. Emphasis on learning can be generated by teachers because they have the most data on needs, interests and learning styles. Also, being closest to students, teachers are in the best position to make purposeful decisions about a network of environments that will produce learning.[9]

Teaching, as defined here, means creating a variety of social, intellectual, and physical conditions from which learners can benefit in a variety of ways. This meaning of teaching is based on Dewey's belief that it is the interaction between a learner and an environment that produces increased knowledge and mastery of skills.[10] In plain words, teachers must make key decisions about creating the setting for learning. Yet, in reality, many critical decisions are made by people who are far removed from the learning environment.

The problem is not only that decisions are made by people who are remote from and without real data about learners. It is also the fact that external decisions are often overriding, more influential than teacher decisions. Directions resulting from insensitive, externally imposed decisions can cause a school to move teachers in ways that are contrary to what students actually need. For example, a school board adoption of a single textbook series for reading curriculum that uses three track grouping can force a teacher to place learners into groups that relate to the textbooks. This required grouping procedure can create a negative stigma for those learners who are assigned to the lower or slower track. The teacher is forced to use a prescribed reading curriculum that does not connect positively with learners. Mismatch resulting from external decisions saps off precious teacher energy that could otherwise be directed toward creating meaningful learning environments.

In many schools, teacher survival becomes adjustment to external decisions; some which fit, others which are completely out-of-joint with the activity necessary for promoting learning. Teachers learn from the school environment too. Survival can come to mean doing more of what is required and less of what is needed. Another option is to resist the counter-productive, required behavior of the school. This is a tough choice, one that alienates teachers from the very setting responsible for their dependency and survival. Teachers who resist become marginal persons living on the fringe of the school. It's odd. Those who are marginal and less likely to last are the teachers who can present to learners a model of human beings able to influence their environment. On the other hand, those who adjust and fit to the incongruence of currently existing schools present a model of human beings who survive by being incorporated

into the structure that reduces their effectiveness. This learning-to-live with incongruence between to al school and immediate learning environment can cause teachers to become unaware of their right and capacity to transform the reality of the education enterprise. Awareness of the existence and consequences of mismatch in the school makes it possible for both principals and teachers, in concert, to look critically at the conditions which are shaping them. Deciding and choosing, creating and re-creating, and ultimately acting on the reality in which one lives is necessary for improvement. Such critical awareness will increase decisions to eliminate traits in the school that hinder learning.[11]

All schools do not have conditions that resist improvement, nor are all schools led by principals who are part of the problem. Yet, experience teaches us that no matter what changes are attempted many schools do not get better. More schools can be improved by leaders who are critically aware of what is blocking advancement of school practices.

A means orientation, a teacher and administrator emphasis, and a top-down decision making process are some conditions in schools that are likely to impinge on school improvement. Principals can use the three conditions advanced here to analyze their own school context. If their school is characterized by some or all of the conditions, they might decide to take purposeful action to eliminate traits that resist. The first step for reconstructing the school environment is arriving at an awareness of the reality that hinders improvement. This critical awareness may result in commitment to take action that will make obsolete the persistent notion that schools do not improve.

FOOTNOTES

1. Critical and editorial comments were contributed by Ward Ghory, Assistant to the Director, Center for Curriculum and Organization, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; and by Phil DeTurk, Headmaster, Shepherd Knapp School, Worcester, Massachusetts.

2. The conditions that resist improvement were determined by collecting data through participant-observer procedures in more than thirty elementary schools in six demographically varied school systems. Participant, teacher and principal perceptions toward what stops improvement in schools were recorded and then clustered to determine patterns most common to all schools. The three primary conditions are reported in this paper. Three additional conditions that were identified but less definite are:

   - Schools have little capacity for research and development. Solutions to problems rely on what has worked best in the past, thus contributing to regression in the light of new demands.

   - Schools isolate teachers from each other and from principals, leaving them to cope individually or in small interest groups with their difficulties; and to celebrate silently their successes.

   - Schools have inadequate knowledge to meet and accept criticism. In the face of a problem, they become defensive and devoted to maintenance and survival.

3. A useful procedure for improving decision making for school organization is described in Myers, Donald, and Sinclair, Robert. "Improved Decision Making for School Organization: What and What For." National Elementary Principal, Volume LII, Number 4, January, 1973, pp. 43-50.

4. For a treatment of the problems associated with the use and misuse of objectives see Fischer, Louis and Sinclair, Robert. "Behavior Objectives, Performance Contracting, Systems Management, and Education." in Yee, Albert (Ed.), Perspectives on Management Systems Approaches in Education. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications, 1973.)

5. Brackenbury, Robert. "Guidelines to Help Schools Formulate and Validate Objectives." in Rational Planning in Curriculum and Instruction. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, Center for the Study of Instruction, 1967, p. 108.

6. For a definition of educational environment and a procedure to measure some dimensions of the education environment of elementary schools see Sinclair, Robert. "Elementary School Educational Environment: Toward Schools That Are Responsible to Students." National Elementary Principal. Vol. XLIX, No. 5, April, 1970.

7. For detailed findings on the possible influence of leadership behavior of principals on learner perceptions of the educational environment see Sinclair, Robert; Sadker, David; and others. Through the Eyes of Children. (Boston: Bureau of Curriculum Innovation, and Institute for Educational Services, 1973).

8. Children and Their Primary Schools: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) Volume 1, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967.

9. A useful descriptive model that could be used to foster teacher decision making for curriculum development is found in Walker, Decker. "The Process of Curriculum Development: A Naturalistic Model". School Review. Volume 80. No. 1, November, 1971.

10. Dewey, John. Experience and Education. New York: Scribners. 1937.

11. An excellent rationale for critical awareness is presented from a Third World perspective in Freire, Paulo. "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom". Harvard Educational Review. Volume 40, No. 2, May, 1970. pp. 205-225.

    Also see Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: The Seabury Press, 1973.